

Persecution: The Making and Memory of Martyrs (i)

April 25, 2006

- What is “martyrdom”? Persecution **and** Commemoration
- **This session:** Martyrdom and persecution before 250
- Martyrdom: Pagan, Jewish, and Christian
- Greek and Roman authors on persecution of Christians and martyrdom
- A look at some texts
- **Next time:** Persecution 250–312 CE, and the impact on Christian communities

What is “martyrdom”? Persecution **and** Commemoration

- Greek *martyros* = “witness,” testifying to one’s devotion to Christ, to the exclusion of any other consideration
- NB: Arabic *shāhid* for “martyr” a calque from ancient Greek
- As with Gospels, Christian sources are our primary evidence so we are interested in:
 - History of persecution and its causes, implications
 - Way Christians understood and commemorated persecutions

Martyrdom: Pagan, Jewish, and Christian

- Scholars have long been interested in connections between ancient Jewish (e.g., 2 Maccabees, and 4 Maccabees) martyrdom and Christian (e.g., Young)
- Others have drawn connections to pagan “philosophical” martyrs (Socrates, but numerous early Roman examples as well)
- More recently some scholars (esp. Bowersock), have stressed **urban and imperial context**
- Most peculiar about **early Christian martyrdom**, not the fact of death, but the **zeal and desire** for it.



Greek and Roman authors on persecution of Christians and martyrdom

- Pliny to Trajan (ca 110): meetings understood as somehow connected with banned political associations; failure to recant is obstinate; result of personal accusations
- Trajan answers: don't go looking for them!
- Tacitus, Annals 15.44 (ca 110, about 60s): A pernicious superstition, hates the human race; but the gruesome killings "not for the public good but to gratify the cruelty of an individual"
- Lucian, Death of Peregrinus (a satirical acct., late 2 C., of a sometime Christian — Next slide)
- In general: a minor development, noted because it reflects on some other point (e.g., Tacitus, the corruption of Nero; Lucian on charlatantry)
- Also note: persecutions are local and sporadic, not empire wide (before 250)
- Resource: <http://www.religiousstudies.uncc.edu/jdtabor/saw.html>



Lucian, Peregrinus, 11ff

... The poor wretches have convinced themselves first and foremost, that they are going to be immortal and live for all time, in consequence of which they despise death and even willingly give themselves into custody, most of them. Furthermore, their first lawgiver persuaded them that they are all brothers of one another, after they have transgressed once for all by denying the Greek gods, and by worshipping that crucified sophist himself and living under his laws. Therefore they despise all things indiscriminately and consider them common property--receiving such doctrines traditionally without any definite evidence.



A look at some texts

- Zeal to die
 - Ignatius of Antioch (Romans 4:1–2, 6:1–3)
- Political alienation and resistance: we are not "Roman"
 - Martyrs of Vienna and Lyon (episode of Sanctus, p. 37)
 - Eusebius, Martyrs of Palestine (episode of the Egyptian martyrs, 11.5–11)
- Martyrs and power
 - Martyrdom of Polycarp (15.2; 18.2 [cf. 17.2])
 - Perpetua and Felicitas (4, 13, 21)


